

PRESS RELEASE

JANUARY 9, 1957

STATEMENT OF CONGRESSMAN JOHN E. FOGARTY, DEMOCRAT OF RHODE ISLAND,  
ON HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY.

Tomorrow, I shall ask for the creation of a Special Committee of the House of Representatives to begin an immediate, sweeping investigation and study of one of our nation's chief causes of death - traffic fatalities on our streets and highways. The National Safety Council reports that traffic accident deaths have reached a new time high of over 40,000 for the year 1956 and forecasts future levels of auto deaths as ever-rising. It calls the situation a "national emergency." This is enough to shock us out of the complacency in which we, as a nation, are seemingly situated.

I believe it is high time we tackled this problem on a national level because obviously we are not doing an effective job on a state by state basis.

For many years I have fought for federal leadership in combatting the twin evils of heart disease and cancer which claim so many American lives. In some measure I have succeeded in getting our federal government to lead the way in those fields as well as in allied fields such as developing programs for alleviation and rehabilitation of our mentally retarded and mentally ill. We are making progress in those fields. But we profit little as a nation to seek to sustain life in one way and at the same time stand helplessly by and watch traffic disasters snuff out or terribly maim otherwise healthy lives, some of which are just beginning.

Dr. Paul Dudley White of Boston, who has stood shoulder to shoulder with me in our effort to preserve and promote national health and safety has spoken to me about the necessity for a federal attack on this problem. The doctor has pointed out that accidents rank as the third major cause of death in this country following closely those attributable to heart disease and cancer. Doctor White further states: "Automobile accidents and especially those due to speed should be considered a major public health challenge today." Certainly the situation cries out for remedy and I, personally, intend to try to do something about it.

Just how or where we should move on a national level to curb and control it can be best answered after a congressional investigation and study. Whether safety factors have kept abreast of our super-powered new motors is a problem which the National Safety Council highlights. We all know that we now have cars capable of producing rates of speed in excess of the capacities of many of our highways and probably beyond the capacity of many of our drivers. Some of these bear brand names more appropriate for aircraft than for any type of ground vehicle. Just how long we can safely continue to raise horsepower under present traffic and roadway conditions is something which needs sound study and investigation now. Soaring insurance rates tell the story of the increase in traffic hazards, and I would hope that the insurance industry, as well as the motor industry, traffic experts and people everywhere will cooperate to help us find the answer. I will welcome suggestions or recommendations from interested people everywhere.

President Eisenhower has recognized the need for a program of national traffic safety, and at the White House Conference on Highway Safety on February 17, 1954, he said: "When any particular activity in the United States takes 38,000 American lives in one year, it becomes a national problem of the first importance, a problem for all of us, for every citizen. It is one of these problems which by its nature has no easy solution. It is many sided."

Today, our traffic deaths and injuries are even greater, and I believe it may be necessary for us to crack down with appropriate federal legislation which we can promptly accomplish after we have concluded our investigation.

Doctor White is coming to see me here in Washington on Saturday morning, January 12. I have also invited the President of the National Safety Council, Ned Dearborn, and Harry I. Kirk, President of the American Automobile Association, to join us at that time. We intend to explore the best possible means of approaching this most serious national problem.